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For Today's FBI, a Chief Who Doesn't Fit the Hoover Mold

Neil Welch, agent in charge of the New York office, is describing changes in the FBI: "An aggressive lawyer took over a floundering, inept, corrupt, miserable bureaucracy and transformed it into a modern, hard-fighting, effective law-enforcement organization."

Though the description is close to being apt, Welch is not talking about William Webster, who has transformed the FBI in the last two years. He is talking about the 29-year-old J. Edgar Hoover when he began his career as director of the bureau in 1924.

Many agents retain fond memories of Hoover, despite the questionable practices that crept into bureau operations in the latter part of his 48-year reign—illegal burglaries, unauthorized wiretaps and character assassinations. Ben H. Cooke, agent in charge in Atlanta, has "a great deal of love and respect" for his former boss. But he adds: "He stayed too long. If he'd left five or 10 years before he died, he would have been hailed as one of the greatest heroes of American history."

On balance, the differences between Webster and Hoover far outweigh the similarities. For Hoover, a confirmed bachelor, the FBI was his whole life—so much so that critics accused him of surrounding himself with sycophants and turning the bureau into his own personality cult. An often intimidating figure with a hair-trigger temper, he was all but unapproachable. He once scribbled a message: "Watch the borders!" Underlings decided he meant the Canadian borders and the word went out. Later, it was learned that he was referring to the borders on his stationery.

Such misunderstandings could never happen with the present director, FBI insiders say. Webster likes straight talk and is so

accessible that aides have been known to telephone him at home at 1:30 a.m. "There's no guessing. There's no reading between the lines," says James O. Ingram, agent in charge of the Chicago office.

Francis M. Mullen, Jr., one of Webster's top aides, recalls the time he used a traditional FBI euphemism, referring to "a highly sensitive source whose testimony cannot be used in court." Webster fixed him with a stare and said evenly: "Are you trying to tell me you used a bug? If you are, say so!"

To help manage the bureau, he has a trio of veteran agents—Homer Boynton, Jr., administration; Lee Colwell, investigations, and Kenneth Joseph, police relations.

Webster takes his job very seriously, but the FBI is not the only thing in his life. He is married and the father of three children. He came to the bureau two years ago at age 53, with a solid career behind him as a St. Louis lawyer who left a \$100,000-a-year law practice in 1970 to become a federal judge.

To unwind, Webster takes to the tennis court. He finds tennis a good way to keep in touch with Washington. Among recent partners: Stansfield Turner, director of the Central Intelligence Agency; Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), and Carl Rowan, a syndicated columnist who has been critical of the FBI in the past.

Webster is limited by law to a single 10-year term. This reduces any temptation to use the FBI's power to cement himself in office. And it makes it less likely that he will duplicate the failing widely attributed to J. Edgar Hoover: Not knowing when to quit.